Systemic Bias in Wikipedia: What It Looks Like, and How to Deal with It

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What it looks like, and how to deal with it

Laura Quilter / Copyright & Information Policy Librarian
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what it looks like

"Systemic bias is the inherent tendency of a process to favor particular outcomes. The term is a neologism that generally refers to human systems..."

types of SB in wikipedia

● systemic bias on Wikipedia replicates the systemic biases of culture at large: racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, majority religion, etc.
● replicates systemic biases of Internet culture: Anglophone, class privilege, "Libertarian" politics, WM
● amplified / modulated by the medium of the Internet:
  ○ pseudonymized communications
  ○ self-selected class of privileged, well-educated, technologically-savvy, folks with time on their hands
● various additional biases: pop culture; tech topics; non-academic; current events; corporate / MSM sources; etc.
what it looks like

content bias
● dearth of articles
● inadequate articles
● perspective bias

editor demographics
● editor experiences
● editor participation, contributions, & retention
The Biographical Dictionary of Women in Science is a 2-volume work containing entries on nearly 3,000 scientists. Below is a list of its entries in Volume II, the text of which is accessible online on book eyeba.com:


- Lucy Leakey, Laetitia Leakey, Laetitia Leakey
- Margaret Braun, Sonya Braun, Sonya Braun
- Maria Angélica Fortes, Maria Angélica Fortes
- Ana Maria Buarque de Macedo, Ana Maria Buarque de Macedo
- Maria Eunice Marques de Souza, Maria Eunice Marques de Souza
- Maria Carolina Marques, Maria Carolina Marques
- Maria Ariadne Machado, Maria Ariadne Machado
- Maria Fatima Marques, Maria Fatima Marques
- Maria Inês Marques, Maria Inês Marques
- Maria José Marques, Maria José Marques
- Maria Luiza Marques, Maria Luiza Marques
- Maria Rosaria Marques, Maria Rosaria Marques
- Maria Victoria Marques, Maria Victoria Marques
- Maria Beatriz Marques, Maria Beatriz Marques
- Maria Fernanda Marques, Maria Fernanda Marques
- Maria Gisela Marques, Maria Gisela Marques
- Maria Isadora Marques, Maria Isadora Marques
- Maria Luiza Marques, Maria Luiza Marques
- Maria Paula Marques, Maria Paula Marques
- Maria Tereza Marques, Maria Tereza Marques
- Maria Vivian Marques, Maria Vivian Marques
- Maria Virginia Marques, Maria Virginia Marques
- Maria Winifred Marques, Maria Winifred Marques
- Maria Zulmira Marques, Maria Zulmira Marques

- Each red link is a woman scientist without an article.

**Biographical Dictionary of Women in Science, User: Dsp13**
what it looks like : inadequate articles

● shorter & less content
● fewer references
● fewer links in or out
● fewer editors & fewer eyes ==> more bugs, typos, bad writing, uncorrected vandalism
● perspective bias ("criticism" sections; unlinked and uncredited family members of men; non-global perspectives; undue weight)
● ... fewer "Featured Articles", "Good Articles", "Do-you-know" highlights; "Vital Articles".
what it looks like: inadequate content

- the article exists!

BUT:

- inadequate article: overall small article relative to topic's importance

- perspective bias: very little discussion of gender / ethnicity
what it looks like: editor experience

- 8.5-15% of editors are women [various]
- Wikipedians are less "agreeable" & less "open"; cultural expression & tone - conflict, tendentiousness; 24% report harassment [Amichai-Hamburger 2008; WES 2011]
- editor frustration because of deleted/reverted work, or lengthy processes to justify / educate
- Note: WikiMedia Editors Survey 2011 looked at nationality/language; education; motivation & experiences; gender. NOT ethnicity, religion...
why does systemic bias persist?

- editing comes from editors: average Wikipedian
  ○ white, male [90%], 32yo, college-educated or student, English-speaking, US or European; single (60%); not a parent (80%) [WES 2011]
- Wikipedia culture established that replicates the "average Wikipedian"
- English sourcing
- digital divide
so why do we care?

- #6th ranked site on Internet
- #1 general reference on Internet -- the go-to for wide variety of answers for children, students, academics, press, etc.
- 2.7Bn pageviews in US in 2011

the good news is that while Wikipedia's failings replicate those of the larger society, and in particular those of Internet society, *Wikipedia is easier to change!*
how to stop worrying & learn to love editing Wikipedia

- "so-fix-it"
  - become an editor (and more)
  - small changes, big changes, writing articles
- understand Wikipedia culture
  - (a) effectively represent your subjects
  - (b) change Wikipedia culture for the better
- change Wikipedia demographics
  - underrepresented interests, skills, and identities
How to make an article bullet-proof: 1

_Become an editor_

- establish yourself as an editor
  - small edits are fine! typos, refs, facts

- follow the core Wikipedia principles
  - notable subject; neutral point of view; no original research; verifiable sources; you don't own it.
  - editorial behavior: assume good faith; talk about content not editors; avoid conflicts of interest.

- when challenged
  - stay civil, and
  - seek allies & outside opinion: friendly objective editors/admins for 2d opinions
How to make an article bullet-proof: 2

Prepare your content

- Pick a topic
- Review any notability or style criteria for your subject (e.g., biographical; entertainment)
- Find a model: similar topic, handled well
  - copy the source if you are new to Wikipedia!
- Start a draft off your userpage:
  - User:Lquilter/Subject (draft)
- Establish notability: Gather 3+ independent refs with detailed coverage of your subject; OR meet other notability criteria
- Seed wikilinks in relevant articles (e.g., awards, lists, subjects)
How to make an article bullet-proof: 3

Write your article

- Assert notability claim in first sentence / paragraph
- Include relevant categories
- Add references and a references section
- Add a section for awards / 3rd-party recognition
- Add a section for notable works, and in comments or talk describe why the works are notable. Add wikilinks on the notable works if they are independently notable.
references & further reading

- Wikipedia, Systemic Bias
- Wikipedia, WikiProject Countering Systemic Bias
- Wikipedia Editors Survey, 2011
- Lots of coverage in press & blogs. See, e.g., Cohen, NYT, 2011/01/31; Sue Gardner, 2011/02/19.